

WRITING MY WAY THROUGH ITALY: ARTS-BASED AUTOETHNOGRAPHY FOR INTERNATIONAL ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this autoethnographic study is to share the power of writing as a transformative research method (Custer, 2014). This study draws from the life of a nontraditional adult learner doctoral student, who while traveling through Italy alone, embarked on a journey of self-discovery and transformation. Using a narrative voice, the researcher blogs her way through a month of travel in which “writing a way through” becomes a metaphor for life. Framed in a seven lens autoethnographic model (Custer, 2014), the researcher’s writing touches universal themes of loss, longing, and loneliness as the traveler anticipates personal challenges and changes along with academic coursework. Through critical reflection, meaning-making, engagement with self and the world, and in the context of a transformative learning theory disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1978, 1991), writing as a way to self informs the researcher in both academic and personal ways. Implications for students and faculty in adult education programs, as well as for practitioners, include the benefits of intersecting arts-based approaches with adult learning and research methodology. Art is universal and crosses international boundaries. Autoethnography is about researcher vulnerability to aid not only individual suffering, but society’s (Custer, 2014).

Keywords: autoethnography, transformative learning theory, adult education, international, writing, arts-based

In both the United States and internationally, nontraditional adult student learners can face many challenges when returning to school for educational degrees. Of the many challenges a student might face as one navigates through higher education, a nontraditional student might also be dealing with grief, loss, and trauma from abuse. The experience of abuse is often laden with shame and silence (Terr, 1990; Walker, 1989, 2009). Abuse may not typically be voiced in an academic classroom, yet for an educator to be sensitive to the possibility of abuse; and provide avenues for arts-based engagement within the course and classroom for all student learners, a safe learning environment is created. Whether a student names abuse, or not, designing educational courses and programs that allow for deep learning in which a student has multiple means for learning and self-reflection can promote both personal and educational transformation and growth. The expression of emotional pain through art can be traced back to the birthplace of modern civilization in Ancient Greece and Rome (Catarci, 2014).

Grief, Loss, and Trauma

Today, in contemporary societies across the globe, we face much unrest, upheaval, and displacement, causing grief, loss, and trauma due to war, sociopolitical battles, natural disasters, rigid ideologies, and abusive interpersonal relationships (Commission of the European Communities, 1997). The effect of grief, loss, and trauma on the lives of adult learners can have an impact on the educational success of the student. Education and learning does not stop when one reaches a certain chronological age. In fact today, across cultures, many adults continue on a path of lifelong learning to improve skills and

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better one's circumstances (Arizona State University, 1985; Coles & United Nations Educational, 1974; Boucouvalas, 1986, 1988). In considering the growing numbers that represent immigration, migration, and marginalized populations, it is staggering to consider the effects of grief, loss, and trauma on people's lives, and how these effects intersect with learning, the acquisition of knowledge, and access to education, not just for children and traditional aged students, but for the nontraditional and first-generation adult student learner as well.

It is relevant in adult education to consider the unique intersections between transformative learning, a theory of adult learning, (Cranton, 2006), and an individual student's specific social context that could include issues with grief, loss, and trauma. In this way, considering the powerful effect that arts-based methods can have on an individual, and as a tool for critical reflection, creative and arts-based methods can help to alleviate stress that might impact a student's ability to fully engage in the learning process (Keeling & Bermudez, 2006; Pennebaker, 1997, 2013; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). The grief, loss, and trauma that a person might experience as a consequence of abuse crosses culture and socioeconomic status, and enters into the classroom with the adult learner whether the word is ever spoken, or not.

Arts-based approaches can be used in educational systems in the United States and internationally to help the nontraditional student learner process the emotional pain of grief, loss, and trauma issues to gain insight, make meaning of the experiences, and to overcome and transform barriers blocking student success. Much literature exists on using art in educational settings, yet for the scope of this study, the specific focus is to look at how autoethnography and writing have influenced my life and learning, and how nontraditional student learners make meaning out of their grief, loss, and trauma experiences.

Transformative Learning Theory

Intersecting the work of Jack Mezirow's (1971, 1978, 1991) transformative learning theory with autoethnography as the research methodology, I used personal journaling and writing a Blog titled *Writing My Way Through Italy* as the artifacts for data collection. I then used critical reflection as a tool in which I processed disorienting dilemmas in my own life. In this way, the broad categories of grief, loss, and trauma became themes that everything else fit into. The autoethnographic work shifted continuously between the vulnerable and personal to what is shared and universal. This is captured in the Blog entries as I explore not only what it means to travel alone internationally, but also what it means to be human.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography "is a style of autobiographical writing and qualitative research that explores an individual's unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions" (Custer, 2014, p. 1).

Schwandt (2015) defines it as a combination of ethnography, in which the researcher looks outward at the world beyond the personal one, and an autobiography, in which one looks inward for a story of one's self. Central to ethnography and with roots in cultural anthropology, Schwandt (2015) writes that ethnography "is the process and product of describing and interpreting cultural behavior" (p. 98). Characteristics of ethnography include time spent in the field, field notes, descriptive data, rapport and empathy with participants, and multiple data sources (Schwandt, 2015). We learn from Wolcott (1985, 1987) the importance of culture in ethnography, and how the researcher is not merely describing cultural events, but coming to understand a group of people at a deeper level. Through the work of ethnography, we see what it is like to be a member of that culture.

In combining the effect of ethnography and autoethnography, Schwandt (2015) writes, "The aim in composing an autoethnographic account is to keep both the subject (knower) and object (that which is being examined) in simultaneous view" (p. 14). The purpose is to "illustrate and evoke rather than to state or make a claim" (p. 14). In Muncey's (2010) *Creating Autoethnographies*, the use of art and creativity is explored. Autoethnography emerged from postmodern philosophy, which welcomes nontraditional "ways of knowing" (Wall, 2016, p. 1). Autoethnography is a form of research in which the researcher starts with a story. From a personal and vulnerable emic perspective, an etic point-of-view emerges to address universal issues and societal phenomenon.

Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method

I chose to frame this project through the work of Custer (2014) because of the metaphor of a lens to look at autoethnography as a transformative research method. The transformative process in autoethnography is due to how many autoethnographical studies relate to painful experiences in which the researcher encounters difficult moments during the course of the research and writing" (Raab, 2013). Custer writes, "Not only does an individual have to face their own pain, often times they are exposed to the pain and anguish of other people who have experienced similar circumstances. It is not an easy task to relate to who we were in the past and understand how that translates into our identity today, but it is worth the effort to reap the rewards of reflexivity and introspection" (2014, p. 1-2). Painful experiences provide a dilemma that the individual learner can reflect on. Discourse with others concerning similar circumstances can be part of the transformative process. Transformation in the autoethnographic process enhances the critical reflection process of transformative learning.

Personal Background and Discussion

The summer I began doctoral coursework in August, I left a full-time clinical mental health therapist position working in substance abuse residential treatment to travel for a month in Italy alone. Part of the rationale included attending a two-week professional development training in Florence. The other part was that I desperately needed time away from what felt like the confines of my life both personally and professionally. I was excited to start a PhD program as a full-time student, but I also felt anxious about leaving a full-time job. I had been working in the counseling field for over twenty years

since earning a master's degree. Before that, my bachelor's degree is in Literature-Creative Writing. From very young, I loved to write. As a child, I wanted to be a teacher and a writer. Yet, for much of my life, writing became secondary to everything else that began to happen, and often lived secretly hidden away in journals. Over the years, I incorporated arts-based methods including the use of visual arts, music, and creative writing into my practice as a counselor. In this way, I used creative methods across settings and populations to include agency, private practice, educational, and specialty treatment settings with children, adolescents, young adults, college students, and adults.

As a nontraditional adult learner, I am also a first-generation college student. Educational challenges in my life include my father's declining health, which began when I was in fourth grade, and his death January of my senior year in high school. At that time and due to financial constraints, I was not able to attend college after high school. When I finally returned to school, I had already been married and divorced, was in my mid-twenties and worked both as a waitress and in the Graphics Department at the university. I have been a nontraditional student for each of my earned educational degrees.

The summer I traveled to Italy, I decided to write a Blog to chronicle my adventures, observations, feelings, and thoughts. I was also in year four of a journal *One Line a Day: A Five-Year Memory Book*. Each of these; traveling alone internationally, writing a Blog, journaling, having used arts-based methods in counseling, doctoral coursework, and disorienting dilemmas in my own life personally, educationally, and professionally have led me to where I am today. I now recognize that even though writing has lived underneath my life, the influence of writing in my life has led me in profound ways. Writing has been a steady companion, change agent, and ongoing dialogue I have had with myself throughout my life. Major themes represent death, loss, loneliness, marital discord, relationship, self-esteem, patterns of emotional abuse, trauma, partner alcoholism, revisiting family-of-origin issues, passion, longing, dreams, parenting, work stress, academic pursuits, and learning to let go. The shift from an emic perspective to an etic position happened fluidly and allowed me to reflect introspectively about self and the world around me. In the broader context of what it means to socially construct one's own narrative, each of us continually focus and shape our inner worlds to the outer worlds in which we inhabit and live within. For me, writing has been a path to self, voice, and empowerment through both creative and critical reflection, personal growth, and healing. In this way, what I have learned through personal journal and Blog writing connects me to the larger world and transitions this body of work from a self-view of the world to one with a universal frame of reference.

Autoethnographic Lens and Blog Entries

Lens 1 changes time. Much of the process in autoethnography is around time and space. Time shifts from a linear chronological progression to one that is without boundaries. Space refers to the elements an individual uses to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct one's identity. Autoethnography is about the lived experience of the researcher and how personal experience can relate to the larger world outside the researcher (Custer, 2014).

Blog entries (in reverse chronological order). *October 5.* Last week my daughter said, “You’re not in Italy anymore” in regards to me talking about the Blog. No, I am not literally in Italy at this time.

Wednesday, August 5/Middle of the Night. 3 a.m. EST. I lay my head on the fur bodies of my two dogs, each 15 years old now, and I listen. I listen for what we do not say. I was warned about the post-Italy blues. I arrived home late Tuesday evening about 10:00 p.m., after being delayed in D.C. for hours after having been traveling since 7:30 a.m. Italy time (6 hours ahead of EST). I went immediately to bed, fell asleep exhausted, and then woke up at 3 a.m. feeling like I wanted to cry from the culture shock I felt from just being home again. The house was quiet. I did not have to use a key to get into my room. Felt sad, hungry, and yet happy in ways to be home. I slept some more. Woke. Spent the day Wednesday at my office. Came home about 5:00 p.m. starving, missing Italy, and craving a pizza. I ordered Domino’s Pizza, fed the dogs, opened mail, wiped down the kitchen counters, and forced myself to stay up until 9:00 p.m. The muscles in my body seemed to melt into the mattress. My dreams vivid. At 3 a.m. I suddenly awoke and could hear the breathing of my dog, who sleeps soundly planted on the floor next to the bed. She is old and feeble and has lost her hearing. I tiptoe around her, go to the kitchen to get juice, put the cat out, and check our other dog, who sleeps downstairs now because she no longer puts in the effort it takes to walk up the steps. Her tail though still thumps on the wood of the floor when I pass through a room she is in. When I look into her soft, brown eyes, a dog who had been abused and left whom we rescued, our two hearts spill with love. Life is a series of going forward and then learning how to let go. Like waves at the ocean that slap the shore. The tip of the wave connecting with the surface of the sand, and then the surge and the pull back to the vast sea it comes from.

Lens 2 requires vulnerability. Autoethnography is about vulnerability on the researcher’s part to heal psychological and emotional wounds of not only the individual, but of society (Custer, 2014). Vulnerability is not seen as weakness, but as engagement and embodiment of courage through writing. As seen in the Blog post entries, I expose my vulnerability through unedited raw expression, stream-of-consciousness, and writing into the immediacy of the moment.

Blog entries. *Tuesday, August 4. 5:30 EST.* Delayed in Washington, D.C. at Dulles Airport. On the flight from Rome there were a lot of Italians on the plane. Everything was spoken first in English and then in Italian. Now that I am back in the U.S., I feel as if I am in culture shock. Everything is in English. I am sitting at the gate looking around. CNN is on the overhead television screen. People are charging their phones and looking at their computers. I find myself asking, “Where are all the Italians?”

Monday, August 3. Writing My Way Through Life. Right? “Writing My Way Through Italy” may have just become “Writing My Way Through Life.” I am not sure what I have done, but I have loved doing it. A hundred years of writing. Mostly secret. Hidden away.

Lens 3 fosters empathy. Through stories and narrative, empathy is fostered for others and for the researcher. Hayano (1979) writes that knowledge arises in sociocultural ways in which language and narrative interacts with life to create and foster a regard for self and others.

Blog entry. *Sunday, August 2 about noon.* Train station in Verona waiting for train to Venice for the day. I am sitting on the platform waiting, hoping I am in the right place waiting for the right train. Traveling alone. Are we not each one of us actually traveling through this life alone? Often longing, yearning, grasping. Companionship to make the journey easier. To fill days with laughter, conversation, a shared meal, a division of labor, and love. Met strong, competent women on this journey. In a few days, I leave Italy. Full with something inside more important than what the beautiful and plentiful food or drink provide, but rich with love for much that is good in the world, and in my life. A traveler's heart is many things. A traveler's heart is brave. A traveler's heart just is. Glad to be back in Verona for night 3. The man at the hotel reception desk, who brought cappuccino to me while I read in the lobby, asked, "Do you always travel alone?"

Lens 4 embodies creativity and innovation. Autoethnography "is innovative by design because it focuses on unique experiences" and "is a creative process" (Custer, 2014, p. 6). The painter, Henri Matisse, said "Creativity takes courage."

Blog entry. *Saturday, August 1 for Friday, July 31. About 7:30 p.m.* This is the most beautiful moment. I could cry. I am seated alone outside at a table in Verona on a side street off Via Carlo Cattaneo. A woman plays the cello. It is Friday night. I am in Italy. The streets and restaurants are alive with people. The opera is tonight across the Piazza Bra at the Arena di Verona, or Anfiteatro Arena. They have seated me, after I was greeted with a flute of Prosecco, at a small table next to a much, much older man. He looks to be in his 80's. He eats alone and is dressed in a suit as if he might be going to the opera. I can see his face in the mirror that hangs on the stone wall our chairs are turned toward. He speaks to the waiter, who treats us each fabulously, in Italian. Feel very self-conscious to be here on this Friday night alone. Yet, I am lifted by the music, which is what drew me to this particular restaurant. I am also awestruck by the beauty of this very moment. Exactly as it is. There is something wonderful about Verona that makes one want to fall in love.

The waiter, when I finished dinner, asked if I wanted a coffee. Then he asked if I would be attending the opera. The young woman at the hotel had said that unreserved stone step seat tickets could be purchased right up until 9:00 p.m. when the opera would begin. At 8:40 p.m. I finished dinner, got up from my seat in the restaurant, and walked down the street with everyone else to the opera. Aida by di Giuseppe Verdi. Fabulous.

Two weeks of training completed. We said our goodbyes to one another and went our separate ways. I find that with people in Italy especially in the train stations it is often a mix of some random act of kindness juxtaposed with an act of exploitation. When I arrived at the hotel after the stress of the train, after taking a taxi because I did not have

the strength within me to deal with a local bus and then walking, which would have been more like wandering lost through an unknown place when all I wanted to do was curl up into a ball and cry, I was surprisingly greeted with so much hospitality, joy, and love that I was somewhat dumbstruck. As I paid the driver, a young woman from the hotel waited, greeted me, took my bags, and walked me in. Never is hospitality more welcoming than after a day of train travel to a place one has never been before. Friday night. Northern Italy. First, there is fear. Then, the letting go.

Lens 5 eliminates boundaries. In autoethnography metaphors, symbols, and allegory can be used (Custer, 2014). “The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural” (Wall, 2006, p. 1). “I am the world and the world is me” (Wall, 2006, p. 1). Writing autoethnography is difficult, yet rewarding work because the researcher and the research are one (Wall, 2008).

Blog entry. *Tuesday & Wednesday, July 28-29.* Met amazing people on this journey with remarkable stories. Their journeys and lives are fascinating, ordinary, extraordinary, and poignant. Felt moved in ways I had not expected. Learned something important about myself from each of them. Traveling alone allows this to happen and unfold in ways that traveling with another impedes. Different types of journeys. Second day in Rome I met a woman from India who prefers to travel alone. Before we began to talk, I had misjudged her. I was caught up in my own self-consciousness and fear. Sometimes the profound nature of connection is not in language, but in the form of art, music, or poetry, or the way someone can look at another and communicate something beautiful back that they see that the other has completely missed, or avoided. I am learning still how to listen. How to be. In the seminar, a wound was opened when the instructor talked about “true self versus false self” and how this develops in the infant, and in the infant/mother relationship. The more I considered the material and how much it applied to me, I wanted to cry. Felt vulnerable and introspective today. Healing. A word that takes on so many meanings. We get good at having honed our own protective selves to do, to go, to work, and to perform at the expense of our own willingness and ability to live authentically.

Lens 6 invites and honors subjectivity. Subjectivity in autoethnography is honored because the researcher is permitted to be in a unique relationship to the research process (Custer, 2014).

Blog entries. *Monday, July 27.* When traveling, and especially with the heat, every decision gets reduced to what is most basic. Clothing, shoes, hair, what to carry, even jewelry. Less of everything. The heat carries a weight of its own. During travel, I am continually re-evaluating and paring down. We really need so little when we travel. I think this should be a reminder to us of how much we have, myself included, and how much we really need. Life is really quite basic if we let it be. We are the ones, myself included, who complicate matters. Keeping it simple takes on new meaning, literally, when one’s day consists of walking to get somewhere. I am learning to reduce what I need down to what is most basic before setting out in the hot sun to go anywhere. Yet, like anyone, we contend with the heat, and push through. There really is no other choice.

Domenica/Sunday, July 26. Much needed day of rest. Been at the pool since breakfast when I simply stepped into the pool space, which extends beautifully from the restaurant space. Everything happens out here. Families sit together, children and adults swim, people lounge, read, work, eat, rest, and talk. Conversation is important. The sense of intimacy in observing conversation is remarkable. I find myself intrigued by men and women partaking in the art of conversation. They talk. They look at each other. I love the concept, which seems mostly lost in American culture today.

Last Sunday, I traveled on the hot trains from Sorrento to Naples to my arrival into Florence. An absolute stranger. The Sunday before, I flew from Philadelphia to Rome overnight. An absolute, absolute stranger. The Sunday before that I was still employed full-time and worrying about everything. Fear gripped me like a vise. I would wake up from sleep with what felt like ice around my heart. The journey from Sunday, July 5th to today is not only like having jumped off of a cliff, but one in which I have been confronted with some of my own deepest fears. I am still an absolute stranger in a wonderful, wonderful land, but I am here.

Thursday & Friday, July 23-24. Before my alarm went off this morning, I woke up with the thought, "We can be monuments." I fell back asleep and then woke up with the alarm thinking, "Make me a monument." I think this is coming from the effect, power, and influence of being in Florence, Italy with all of its amazing and rich art and architectural history. "Make me a monument" is not about vanity, nor about something I want, but about our ability as people to be there for one another. "Make me a monument" has everything to do with who we are and what we stand for. Being in Italy is helping me to remember who I am, and forcing me to face who I want to be.

Thursday. Today we drove to Arezzo in Lorenzo's car to meet Frank and the others. Frank's friend, Marco, met us at the Cattedrale Di Arezzo. Inside, two choir members in the loft were practicing. Their two powerful voices. It is easy to feel like weeping here. In the best sense of the verb "to cry." We spoke with Marco about the photography program as well as another project he is involved with in which he works with people with disabilities. It is beautiful work to help someone find their voice. Frank says, that art is felt "with my stomach," when asked of him, "How do you paint?" Art must show us something about the artist; otherwise, it is sterile, boring, or cliché. Everything has already been done. Tell me something about what is inside of you. That is what I want to know. That is where the power is. That is what makes what you say or create new and exciting. Driving back, we were invited to a gallery party that evening in a studio where I met British artists living in Italy. Beatrice said to go to Piazza San Marco, then Via Salvestrina, 1. Then, Beatrice wrote in my small red journal, find the "little door in the wall." Later, when we discovered the door and opened it, we were transformed into an enchanted secret garden.

Tuesday, July 21. Posted Wednesday. At lunch I opened the door to a local restaurant, Locanda Stenterello on Via Danimarca 26, and felt as if I had fallen into a painting. A Renoir to be exact. His "Luncheon of the Boating Party," which I have always liked.

Inside, the place was very small. One large glass case with prosciutto and other meats. The patrons all locals. Brown wooden tables. Eight men sat together at a long table at the front window. There were containers of olive oil and bags of bread on their table. Fifteen people including the two men who worked there and myself filled the space. Initially, I felt a flush of excitement for what I had just discovered, which instantly turned into fear when I realized that now I would have to actually speak and order something. The dark featured young man behind the heavy wood counter greeted me in Italian. He asked, in broken English, if I understood the board, and pointed out the pasta dishes. He was cutting slices of cantaloupe onto a platter. Without exactly knowing what I was ordering, the two of us negotiated bread, prosciutto, mozzarella, which was served as a whole homemade ball, cut in two on the plate, and slices of cantaloupe. He had kind eyes. I think he could smell my fear. All the people studied me. I sat in a wooden chair among them feeling completely vulnerable and exposed. The men at the table were laborers on their lunch hour. A mix of younger and older men. Watching them leave was an event. They did not just get up and leave. They got up and talked to most everybody, to each other, they hugged, cajoled, stood there, and then finally opened the door and filed past me through the glass window down the narrow street. I thought, "This is living." They had such a sense of camaraderie to them.

Monday, July 20. This is immersion. 99 degrees. Caffetteria Piansa. Charming bakery and coffee shop. Having a cappuccino. I am the only Americana in here. The place is alive with conversation. At each small round table. There is a counter to order coffee. Cases filled with pastries. And some with bottles of wine. The Italian language fills the air like a heady perfume. Everybody talks. Accept for me. I listen. To everything. Breathe it in. Feel excited, but for what, I do not know. Just to be here. I want to video the whole experience. The clatter of the bone colored cups and saucers. The music I just realized is playing. This is fabulous. This is the poetry of life. To be alone in another country. I watch and listen. I am recording an imprint of who I am. I could cry. Joy not sadness. I am so moved inside. Sitting in this café it is as if I have been lifted into a world where everything is alive. Yet, I feel afraid. Why? Always fear. Resides within me. I realize what a pale version of myself I have been living. Italian women wear black bras under white and cream blouses. Florence feels strong. Intimidating. Even the name. Firenze. All around me. Language, yet I have no idea what is being said. I cannot read the signs, understand kilometers, nor the temperature in Celsius. I speak as little as possible fearing that the more I say the more ignorant I will sound. When I think I know what I am doing, but I clearly do not someone manages to guide me like the cashier in her black pants, white blouse, apron, and hat. When I selected the mango frozen dessert from the case and presented this along with the cup of cappuccino to pay, she came out from behind the counter, returned with a saucer and two napkins, put the dessert on the plate on top of one of the napkins. She had taught me what to do. On the receipt I see that I purchased Sorbetto Artigianale. I am existing on instinct.

This morning I set out from the hotel for the Libera Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze at Piazza di Badia a Ripoli. Walked all around the Piazza, stepped into a shop for reassurance that I was walking the right way, and studied street signs with foreign words that meant nothing to me. Figured it out Found it. Not difficult once I knew where I was

going. At one point, I wanted to cry, not from joy or inspiration, but from that feeling a child must get when he or she realizes that they recognize nothing, and clearly must be lost. I think of dementia and Alzheimer's. I think of my mother in her final years.

The photography program is a discussion and learning seminar with Frank, an Italian photographer. Story, art, what an artist is, and photography. I stepped into the room this morning really having no idea what this would be about, but from the moment I entered the art school and was led upstairs and into the room, I began to understand how often life is just this. A falling into something, or someone, almost by accident, that completely and profoundly changes everything. Changes the light inside us. My whole life I have been pushing and pulling through from light to darkness and back again through each full circle of moon. This morning, Frank said that to be an artist, step two is to "look for a crack in the wall." More difficult, he said, than the first step, which is "to produce a body of work." Work that has focus and is serious.

Lens 7 provides therapeutic benefits. Custer writes, "Autoethnography is therapeutic in nature and writing about one's Self in relation to a theory, experience, or belief is transformative. Great insight can be gained through the vulnerability that an individual places him or herself in order to relive and share traumatic events from their private lives. In dialogue with another person about these writings, additional growth and healing can occur" (Custer, 2014, p. 9).

Blog entry. *Sunday, July 19.* Leaving Sorrento. Eighteen year old girl from Sorrento helped me at the train station when my ticket would not go through in the ticket machine after several attempts. She said, "Do you trust me?" I let her help me. We sat together on the train until she got off at Piano di Sorrento to meet friends to go swimming. The heat, and how it sticks to you as soon as one steps out into it is grueling. You see it on our faces. Like the beautiful young man on the train. It is easy to walk around in circles when you don't know where you are going. I thought about the kindness of the Italian station worker on Wednesday, who helped me navigate this station, even though we do not speak the same language. There was an instant in the exchange with him in which he made a decision to be kind, and I made a decision to trust him enough to walk along through the station with him guiding me on how to get downstairs to the right train. In a busy place such as this, and in an environment in which you have been warned by many people to trust no one, the kindness of a stranger is reassuring. I have made it to Florence.

Saturday, July 18. I spill into places like restaurants, and my hotel at the end of the day looking so tired and hot. It will be a welcome respite to arrive in Florence tomorrow afternoon and be able to stay in one place for two weeks. I love travel, but travel is not always easy. Being a good traveler means that you have to graciously tolerate things like exhaustion, heat, crowds, discomfort, waiting, and not knowing what you are doing. Being somewhere makes it real. I am a woman of moderate means, yet I make travel happen because travel is important to me. Travel is high on my hierarchy of needs.

My father believed that “family is everything.” I clearly see this everywhere I go. I have been treated with graciousness, respect, and kindness. The head waiter at the hotel kisses my hand as I am seated, and says, “Buena sera, señora.” Italians, despite any stereotype, are full of honor, tradition, and appreciation of what is beautiful in all things. Italians are contemporary, quintessential, and Renaissance all at the same time. They talk on cell phones, lean in doorways, and drive Fiats and BMWs. Women and men maneuver through traffic on scooters. Everyone wears sunglasses. Ray Ban and Prada. The shoes. Fine leather. Italian men and women are handsome. I wish I was young, beautiful, and in love with an Italian. I remember that I am an Italian. On the bus in Capri yesterday, the way a man put his arm around the small of his wife’s back to pull her close to him to steady her was arresting. He stood one step below her. They were two feet in front of me. I wondered if they were actually married. She looked happy and smiled at him. They were middle aged. The way his hand connected to her and held her was what was beautiful. I wanted to photograph his hand on the soft cloth of her dress. Of course, I did not.

Italy feels like home. I am supposed to be here. Right now. This way. Alone. I sit at dinner and think of my grandparents, four people from Termini Imerese near Palermo in Sicily. People I never knew. I know things about my father from the stories I have heard about him over the years from my sister, brother, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Interesting value that “family is everything,” and is what he lived his life by, a man who lost his own family when he was only ten years old and his mother died. Not sure of the reason for this journey of mine. For any of our journeys really. This week I have been weary, hot, lost, far away from what I know, and somewhat lonely, but I have loved every minute of it despite any discomfort with the heat or fatigue. Each evening, I returned to the hotel, a weary traveler, yet full from the riches and blessings of each day spent in travel thus far in my ancestral homeland of Italia.

Tuesday, July 14. Nine hour walking and bus tour that included the Pantheon, Vatican, and Sistine Chapel among many other sites. All traces of whatever insecurity I had been feeling earlier was instantly gone. Felt connected to something very large and outside of myself. It truly was one of those moments in which my breath stopped, and I fell silent within my own silence. Later, standing under Michelangelo’s ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, and looking up at the famous “The Creation of Adam” with the hand of God reaching for the hand of man, I stood in awe. Italy is fabulous and so full of life. The history. The art. The food. The music. The people. The language. I am in love.

Later on Monday, July 13. First day in Italy. Rome. At hotel. Of course, I am exhausted from not having slept, so everything seems hard. Women in heeled shoes ride scooters through the many narrow streets. I sit outside at the hotel restaurant listening to a woman sing in Italian while enjoying an aperitif. To my first day. To life.

Sunday July 5. Italy is more than a trip to Europe. It is way past time to begin living deliberately. I journal, read, pray. I think large. I continue to dream the impossible, love life, people, and experience. I am grateful for my oldest son, who made Italy possible last Christmas saying, “Mom, just go.” He said, “Find a way to make it happen. Find a

conference. Figure it out. Go to Italy. You have been talking about it for years.” When I replied, “You mean go by myself?” he said, “Yes.” Radical idea. His gift that day handwritten on an 8 ½ by 11 piece of blank white paper folded in four and laid on the table for me to open, simply said, “REDEEM FOR (1) ITALY FLIGHT.” I asked about the stipulations. There were none. What he did with five little words strung together in a sentence did more than give a holiday gift to his mother. He planted a seed and rocked my world. Slowly, yet interestingly, everything began to shift and change inside. The universe began to open its arms for me. In order to nourish my own soul, I must first remember who I am. I catch myself frozen with fear. Feel jittery. Also filled with incredible excitement and anticipation as if I were a young child, or a younger version of myself getting ready to embark on my own journey at 18, instead of on the path of another. To my mother no longer in this life, “Mom, finally I am beginning to feel some of that thing called joy you so wanted me to have.” I love you. Ti amo.

Sunday, July 12. Day of. Woke up with fright around my heart. I am about to dive off a cliff is what it feels like. Full-time job done after months of notice. The seed planted six months ago is ready to fruit. I leave the hotel at 3 for the airport.

Implications of Autoethnography & Transformative Learning Theory

Lake (2015) writes, “Methodological transparency and reflexivity is an essential marker of autoethnographic work.” In this way, the researcher is challenged to grow beyond an individual comfort zone, not just for oneself, but as a way to help others. Hayano (1979) writes that done well autoethnographic work has “relevance to broader contemporary and systemic issues.” These two examples share strengths of autoethnographic work. A limitation of autoethnography includes when the focus is on “I” (Lake, 2015) without the perspective of universality. Other limitations include self-indulgence and narrowed focus (Hayano, 1979), along with how autoethnography is only now gaining respect as a research method (Custer, 2014).

Future implications include that autoethnography is beginning to be seen as a “way of knowing” (Custer, 2014), and “the benefits of autoethnography in education, counseling, psychology, sociology, the arts, and other spheres are prominent subjects of discussion” (Custer, 2014, p. 10). “We travel not to escape life, but for life not to escape us.” - Anonymous.

From an adult learner perspective, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (1978, 1991) is seen as a method for using writing to transform experiences of grief, loss, and trauma. In my own life, and as a model to others, I have grappled with discord in a way to model for others the power of writing, sharing one’s story, and recognizing an emergent voice. Implications and gaps in the literature suggest that future research is needed to support an adult learner’s use of transformative learning theory through an autoethnographic approach as the ontological foundation. In this way, one can begin to understand the lived experience of grief, loss, and trauma, along with the transformative nature of self-growth and change after disorienting dilemmas in one’s life. For me, writing and creativity are essential to healing, growth, and transformative learning.

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